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SUBJECT: GUATEMALAN SOLDIERS ALLEGEDLY BEAT STREET KIDS

¶1. (U) Summary: Allegations surfaced that Guatemala's joint military-police patrols are not operating as designed. Guatemalan Army units are in some instances patrolling without their police counterparts and thus without any legal authority to conduct arrests or detentions. Worse, a respected NGO has filed a complaint against the Guatemalan Army claiming that an Army patrol severely beat three street children. The Charge d'Affaires raised our concerns about the incident with the unit's commander, who claimed the victims had been beaten by others. End summary.

Soldiers on the Street; Allegations of Abuse

¶2. (U) A local NGO filed a complaint with the Prosecutor General's Office against the Guatemalan Army over a May 22 incident in which soldiers allegedly beat three adolescents in the capital. Casa Alianza, the local affiliate of U.S.-based NGO Covenant House, works extensively with street children in Guatemala. On May 22, Casa Alianza staff received an anonymous telephone call that claimed soldiers were beating children in an abandoned building in Zone 1 of Guatemala City. Casa Alianza staff arrived at the scene and found three severely beaten adolescent boys, whom they took to Casa Alianza's shelter for boys in nearby Antigua for medical care.

¶3. (U) After providing medical care and debriefing the victims, Casa Alianza filed a complaint with the Prosecutor General's Office. The complaint alleged that on May 22 at 9:30 am on 8th Avenue between 19th and 20th Streets of Zone 1, two vehicles possibly from the Army (identified as 007GDH and 010GDH) arrived with an unconfirmed number of soldiers. The soldiers entered a building, found three adolescent boys, and beat them severely. The three victims stayed several days at the Casa Alianza shelter, but have since left. Casa Alianza staff, however, provided us with a dozen photographs to document the extent of the injuries.

¶4. (U) Guatemala employs joint patrols comprised of National Civilian Police (PNC) and Guatemalan Army soldiers to augment the meager resources of the PNC in specific high-crime areas. In a new supplemental effort, the military has deployed almost 3,000 recently trained reservists to patrol jointly with the PNC. The soldiers' participation is intended solely to provide security to the PNC. Although in this particular instance the deployed soldiers were from a military police unit, they had no legal authority to conduct arrests or detentions.

¶5. (SBU) According to the Casa Alianza staff, however, the victims were adamant that there were no PNC personnel present in the May 22 patrol. Casa Alianza staff also told us that an officer in the military police unit designated to participate in joint patrols confirmed to them that there

were two patrols in the area on the given day. The Charge d'Affaires raised the brutality allegations with the commanding officer of the unit (the Army's Honor Guard), who said that the Honor Guard's internal investigation confirmed the presence of the soldiers, but that they arrived after the victims had been beaten by someone else.

¶6. (SBU) Separately, military sources have told us that PNC officers regularly fail to appear for planned joint patrols, especially with the military reservists, but that the Army intends to follow President Berger's orders to deploy assets, with or without PNC presence. Embassy staff stressed to our Guatemalan Army contacts that the military should not patrol the streets without the PNC. Military sources tell us that President Berger insists on maintaining a visible military presence on the street.

Comment

¶7. (SBU) There have been credible reports of torture, abuse, and other mistreatment by members of the PNC. This complaint of army brutality, however, is notable due to the specific details (location, license plate numbers, and the time of the incident). The phone caller who first tipped off Casa Alianza had said it was soldiers who were beating the youth. The Honor Guard Commander's account therefore strikes us as implausible, but given that the evidence -- oral testimony by street children who are no longer available for comment -- is weak, we expect little further action. We are concerned that the impunity in this case will send the wrong message to other soldiers. Regardless of any future prosecution or punishment, military patrols without a PNC presence are a concern. Joint patrols, while apparently popular with the residents in high-crime neighborhoods, have been portrayed by the human rights community as a "militarization" of citizen security. Guatemala's leading daily paper, Prensa Libre, reported June 13 that the Human Rights Ombudsman (PDH) is investigating reports of abuse by army soldiers patrolling the streets.

Wharton